

# A Transformational- Generative Approach towards Understanding Al-Istifham

Dr. Fatai Owolabi Jamiu

Affiliation: Tai University of Education, Ijagun; Ijebu-Ode, Ogun State

A lecturer at Department of Religious Studies

Postal Address: P.O. Box 1951, Ijebu-Ode, Ogun State

E-Mail: fatja\_miu2@yahoo.com

## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyse the formation of interrogative sentences in Arabic through the application of the basic linguistic concepts and to explain the derivation of those sentences with their transformations via the employment of the Transformational-Generative tools and concepts.

This paper attempts to examine the ways and manners which

al-Istifham could be understood through a transformational-generative approach. It begins with an introduction with a sketchy overview of the origin and development of Arabic grammar in the Arab world. Effort is made to explain the theoretical framework used in the paper. Basic terms and concepts are carefully explained. We have been able to show that, Arabic, as a language with VSO word-order, allows a right hand movement. It is discovered that it is categorized mainly into two, viz: (1) al-Istifham al-Lughawi (linguistic question) and (2) al-Istifham al-Adabi (literary question). The formal is characterized by abhathun lughawiyyah (linguistic analysis) but the latter is characterized by aghradun balaghiyyah

(rhetorical objectives). The study shows that where two particles of Istifham Hal and Hamzah are used they both have a syntactic and semantic markers which would be answered by any of Adawatul-Jawab (answer tools).

## Introduction

The grammar of any language is as important as the language itself. This is because the study of grammar reveals how language works. Grammar as a branch of linguistics deals with form and structure of words and their interrelation in sentences. According to Yusuf (1997:1), this branch of linguistics has been receiving a great and increasing attention among the linguists formed our motivation to this study. Our syntactic excursion to the study of *al-Istifham* would take Transformative –Generative grammar as a guide.

A language, according to Allerton (1990:68-112) “is basically a system of signs, i.e. of institutionalized sensory patterns that ‘stand for’ something beyond themselves, so that they ‘mean’ something. These signs and words are governed by a set of rules that are referred to as grammar of any language. Liliane Haegeman (1992:121) has submitted that “the totality of all the rules and principles that have been formulated with respect to a language constitutes the grammar of that language”. Grammar is also a systematic study and description of a language. In linguistics, grammar is a term for the syntactic and morphological system, which every unimpaired person acquires. Grammar is intended as an aid to the learning and teaching of a language.

The word ‘grammar’ is most commonly used to mean a description of the structure of the sentences in a language. A grammatical description of Arabic, for instance recognizes and indicates how these elements are related to each other. For example, the subject of an Arabic sentence comes after the verb, and before the predicate if the sentence is verb-less. Grammar also specifies the manner in which the basic elements are combined into larger units. Fu’ad Nu’mān (1973:17) describes Arabic *Nahw* (syntax) as

*Rules and principles that inform, the role and function of every word, the vowelization of last letters of those words and their analysis.*

Every language has a way to describe what is considered correct speech. The rules for the correct usage in any language are said to be prescribed and traditional. Hence, it is called traditional or classical grammar. In Arabic, the traditional grammar as opined by Dayf (1992:14) is said to be originated and established by Abul-Aswad ad-Du’ali on the initiation and order of ‘Ali b. ‘Abi Talib.

However, the interest in the study of language, and, more specifically, in the study of grammar can be traced back to the ancient Greeks. At first, the Greeks’ concern for language was rooted in their philosophical studies, and in this connection there arose a number of controversies over the nature of language. One of the best known of these was the *physis-nomos* controversy in BC 200, which according to Lean (1993:95), centred around the question of whether language is a product of nature (*physis*) or a product of convention (*nomos*).

One very significant contribution to the study of language was that of Dionysius Thorax (c.170- 190 BC). It was Thorax who presented one of the first descriptions of what is today called phonology and morphology. The father of modern grammatical theory and of synchronic grammar particularly was the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) followed by Leonard Bloomfield (1887-1949) (Allerton, 1990:115).

The major trend in linguistics in recent time is transformational generative grammar. The year 1957 was a turning point in the history of language in the world. It was an American linguist, Noam Chomsky, who published in his work '*Syntactic Structure*' a new approach to the study of grammar. This approach, according to Chomsky (1965:3), was subsequently known as "Transformational Generative Grammar".

However, the syntactic debate that occurred between the different schools of Arabic grammar, such as *Basrah* and *Kufah* schools of grammar, as opined by Samira (1987:139) can be referred to as a contribution to the study of Arabic grammar.

### Theoretical Framework

This study has adopted basically the transformational generative approach as our guide to the syntactic analysis of *al-Istifham*. We shall use the Extended ST model which is one of the revised versions of Chomsky's *Aspects of the theory of syntax* popularly known as ST. We have chosen to use the EST model in order to be able to handle more adequately the description of Yes/No and Who-Questions in Arabic.

According to Katz and Postal, transformations are meaning – preserving since they do not change meaning of sentence as general consensus in Standard Theory as maintained by Banjo (1969:40). Thus, questions are the same as the corresponding declaratives in underlying structure as shown below:

أ- سرق أحد كتابي

1. a. Someone stole my book

سرق أحد المال

Someone stole the money

من سرق كتابي ؟

b. Who stole my book?

من سرق المال ؟

Who stole the money?

To further illuminate their postulation, Katz and Postal proposed that question be marked as such in deep structure and that the constituent being questioned also be marked. They posited the Deep Structure morpheme 'Q' to carry out the first of these functions and Wh- morpheme for the second. Thus, the sentence of 1(a&b) would have the corresponding deep structure represented in 2 (a&b)

سرق أحد كتابي

2. a. Someone stole my book

لماذا سرق أحد كتابي ؟

b. Why someone stole my book?

At the syntactic level, the Q-morpheme would replace the subject of the verb to become:

سرق من كتابي

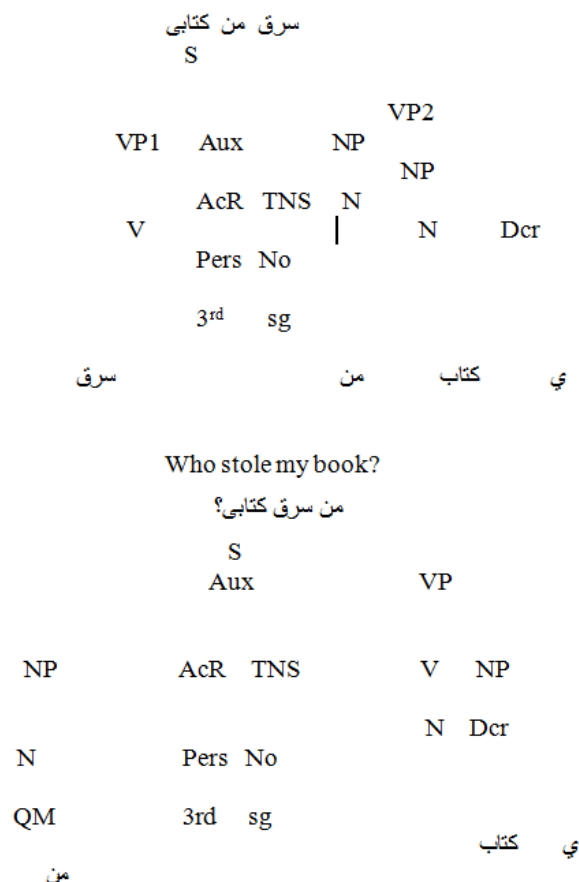
3. a. Who stole my book?

Then, the law of Wh-movement which is known in Arabic as *Sadaarah* would be applied. (Wh-movement is the movement of the wh-word or its equivalents from its original position within the declarative sentence to the initial sentence position) and the product would be:

من سرق كتابي ؟

b. Who stole my book?

The analysis is the following in the tree diagram  
 Basic/Surface Structure



### Basic Terms and Concepts on Arabic Grammar

The origin of Arabic grammar goes back to the 7<sup>th</sup> century. The birth of which was exerted by efforts to put an end to prevalent grammatical errors in reading of the Qur'an. The Arabs were known for their eloquence and intelligence. They talk with error-free tongue and lucidity. The grammatical errors were occasioned by the spread of Islam to other nations and the need to use Arabic by the new converts as a language of communication and religion. The prevalent grammatical mistakes were not only common to the non-Arabs but also to the Arabs themselves. This is because of their interaction with speakers of other languages. It has been said that even Hajjaj b. Yusuf, who was known for eloquence and oratory prowess, as maintained by Dayf (1992:12) committed grave grammatical mistakes in his *khutbah* which shows the wide spread and predominance of this linguistic disorder and malady.

It thus became imperative to proscribe the errors and prescribe some grammatical rules in order to improve the language. Hence, the rules and principles of Arabic grammar were codified. This was later known as classical Arabic grammar which is prescriptive in nature because it states the rules that govern Arabic language. According to Dayf (1992:13), the impetus behind the codification of Arabic grammar was mainly religious and social, in order to protect and preserve the language of the Holy Qur'an. The precursors of Arabic grammar were the like of Abul Aswad ad-Duali, Abdullah b. Abi Ishaq and 'Isa b. 'Umar whose views were entrenched in the formulation of Arabic grammar.

#### Transformational-generative Grammar

In 1957, Noam Chomsky propounded a grammatical theory often referred to as "Transformational-Generative-Grammar". It is a theory of generative syntax which addresses the problem of what language is, and what makes language a specifically human phenomenon as explained by Olateju (1998:140). Transformational grammar is said to be generative because it reflects the 'productive' or 'creative' aspect of human language. Productivity and creativity in human language refer to ability to generate (construct) and understand an indefinitely large number of sentences in one's first or second language, including sentences that one never heard before.

In other words, Transformational Grammar as opined by Adeyemi (2000:26) is based on what a language user knows about his language, which would be obviously manifested in his ability to recognize utterances that are 'grammatical' and those that are 'ungrammatical'. As an hypothetical example, an Arab or Arabist on

hearing or reading the following sentences:

4. a. The boy went to the school  
 ذهاب الولد إلى المدرسة  
 إلى ذهب المدرسة الولد

b. To go the school the boy  
 recognizes (4a) as grammatical and well-formed and (4b) as ill-formed and ungrammatical because it is not in the accepted formal structure and word-order.

### Competence and Performance

In order to establish the linguistic theory or grammar for a language, transformationists often resort to the native speaker-hearer's intuitive knowledge about different types of sentences in the language. The native speaker-hearer has the ability to decide whether a sentence is accepted or not without being educated. This intuition is what the transformationists call 'competence' while 'performance' refers to the actual (contextual) use of language in the society. For instance, you don't need to tell an Arab or Arabist that the following sentences are paraphrases of each other, that is, they have the same meaning:

5. a. Are you leaving your work now?  
 أترك أنت عملك الان ؟ - أنت تترك عملك ؟  
 يقوم الولد - الولد قائم .  
 b. The boy is standing.  
 كتبت الرسالة - كانت الرسالة مكتوبة  
 c. The letter was written.

From these, we can say that someone would be linguistically competent in any language when he is able:

- (i) To recognize grammatical and ungrammatical sentences in that language.
- (ii) To produce (speak) and understand infinite number of sentences in that language.
- (iii) To detect ambiguity
- (iv) To recognize sentences that are paraphrases of each other.

### Transformation

A transformation is a tool or device used to change the form of one linguistic structure to another. For instance, an active sentence *al-Jumlatul-Ma'lumat* be change to a passive sentence *al-Jumlatul-Majhulat* while a simple declarative sentence can be changed to a question through the use of transformation. Examples:

6. a. Zayd wrote a letter  
 كتب زيد رسالة  
 b. A letter was written  
 كتبت رسالة  
 c. You read a book  
 قرأت كتابا  
 كم كتابا قرأت ؟  
 d. How many books did you read?

According to Chomsky, transformation is "a rule that operates on given string with a given constituent structure and converts it into a new string with a new derived constituent structure (Adeyemi, 2000:27). The purpose of transformations contained in the transformational component of Chomsky's grammar as observed by Riemsdijk and Williams (1980:3) is to state explicitly relation that exists between distinct surface structures and deep structure in accordance with the native speaker's intuition about his language. Transformation operates on phrase markers (PMS) as in

		S			
QM	VP1	NP	AUX	VP2	
		N		DER	NP
					N

by performing one or more basic operations i.e. movements, deletion, re-ordering of element etc. in the PMS.

In Transformation Grammar, transformation is of two kinds:

- (i.) The obligatory transformation
- (ii.) The optional transformation.

In obligatory transformation, application of a set of transformational rules is obligatory if the sentences to be generated are to be grammatical. As for optional transformation, application of such rules is not compulsory but optional. This kind of transformation characterizes Arabic literary output most especially poetry where a poet may regard or disregard the grammatical rules and syntactic order.

### Al-Istifham

*Al-Istifham* means questions in Arabic but in general usage; it is a form of language that invites a reply. In

grammar, according to Johnson (1996:227) a term in the classification of sentences, referring to types distinguished by form and function from such other sentence types as statement and command. Nu'mah (1973:17) defines *al-Istifham* thus:

"هو طلب العلم بشيء لم يكن معلوما من قبل ويجاب عنه  
 بتعيين المستفهم عنه، أو بإحدى أدوات الجواب"

Seeking for an information on something that is not  
 Known before and always answered by specifying  
 the information required or by using one of the answer  
 tools.

However, the term 'question' could be regarded as a genetic term for several constructions that require information from addressee. It differs in form and function.

In Arabic language, *Istifham* is categorized mainly into two, viz: (1) *al-Istifham al-Lughawi* (linguistic question) and (2) *al-Istifham al-Adabi* (literary question). The formal is characterized by *abthathun lughawiyyah* (linguistic analysis) but the latter is characterized by *aghradun balaghiyyah* (rhetorical objectives). The two are sub-divided into different classes according to the type of answers they elicit as postulated by Radford (1988:49). Major typological divisions of *al-Istifham* are as follows:

- (1) *al-Istifham at-Tamm* (Yes/No question)
- (2) *al-Istifham al-Juz'i* (wh-question)
- (3) *al-Istifham al-Adabi* (Rhetorical question)
- (4) *al-Istifham al-Ikhtiyari* (Alternative question)
- (5) *al-Istifham at-Takriri* (Echo question)
- (6) *al-Istifham ghayr takriri* (Non-Echo question)
- (7) *al-Istifham at-Tasrihi* (Direct question)
- (8) *al-Istifham ghayr at-Tasrihi* (Indirect question).

#### ***Al-Istifham at-Tamm* (Yes/No Question)**

This is a kind of question in which the interrogation refers to the whole sentence hence it is named '*tamm*' (complete). In English, according to Radford (1988:49) it is called Yes/No because they can be appropriately responded to by the use of either a positive (Yes) or negative (No) values or their formal equivalents in other languages like *na'm* (yes) or *la* (no) in Arabic language. Such questions indicate an uncertainty in the part of the speaker and require a clarification- affirmative or negative – on the part of the addressee. Formally, in Arabic this type of question is characterized by two particles *Hal* and *Hamzah*. These two particles are always initially-positioned. The two particles of *Istifham Hal* and *Hamzah* are both a syntactic and semantic markers. Any sentence that starts with any of the 'question particles' and would be answered by any of *Adawatul-Jawab* (answer tools). These answer tools are:

نعم، بلى، أي، لا، جیر، أجل، كلا

This does not mean that *al-Istifham at-Tamm* (Yes/No) cannot be circumvented by other answers, as the examples show below:

أأنت تذهب إلى المدرسة ؟

7. Are you going to school?

This would be appropriately answered by (*na'm*) 'Yes' or (*la*) 'No' but there are other possibilities as given below:

لا أدري

8. a. I don't know ?

ربما

b. Perhaps, may be

لماذا تسألني ؟

c. Why are you asking me?

*al-Istifham at-Tamm* (Yes/No Question) is sub-categorized into two:

- (1) *Hal* question
- (2) *Hamzah* question.

#### ***Hamzah* Question**

This is a kind of interrogative sentence that starts with *hamzah*. This morpheme is a question marker in any sentence it starts. Examples are:

أقرأت الكتاب ؟

9. a. Did you read the book?

أتذهب إلى المدرسة ؟

b. Will you go to the school?

أتبيع الصابون ؟

c. Do you sell soap?

Their corresponding declarative will be the above mentioned sentences without morpheme *Hamzah* at the beginning. All examples given above are positive-oriented, because what succeed *hamzah* are positive, and response for this would be (Yes) *na'm* or (No) *la* but when negative tools succeed the question particle *hamzah* the negative response would be *na'm* while the positive response would be *bala*.

### Formation of *Hamzah* Question

In Arabic, *hamzah* question is formed by addition of *hamzah* as question maker to the initial part of the sentence. Furthermore, the *hamzah* question is not a prefix-restricted to any of the noun (*ism*) or verb (*fi'l*), it does appear before the two. *Hamzah* can appear before the noun or verb as the course may be. For example:

أسرق الولد ؟

10. a. Did the boy steal?

أىغضب الأستاذ ؟

b. Does the teacher angry?

أأنت مسافر ؟

c. Are you traveling?

In the first example, the question maker (*hamzah*) is followed by verb (*saraq*). The *hamzah* would be analysed grammatically as *harful-Istifham*

while *saraq* and *al-Walad* would be grammatically explained as verb and subject. In the example No. 10c, *hamzah* would be analysed as *harful-Istifham* while *anta musafirun* are subject and predicate (*Mubtada' wa Khabar*)

### Transformation of *Hamzah*

In linguistics, the transformation needed to derive *hamzah* question from their underlying representations. In English, the transformation is to move auxiliary to the sentence-initially. Example: Tola can write ----- Can Tola write?

For the data available in Arabic, we argue that there is no auxiliary movement. What is needed to derive the question is to move the abstract Q- constituent to the first position of the sentence and replace it with the Q morpheme. For example:

أىذهب زيد ؟

Surface structure: (11.a.) Will Zayd go?

يذهب زيد أ

Deep structure: (11.b.) Zayd will go (Qm)

أذهب عمر إلى المدرسة ؟

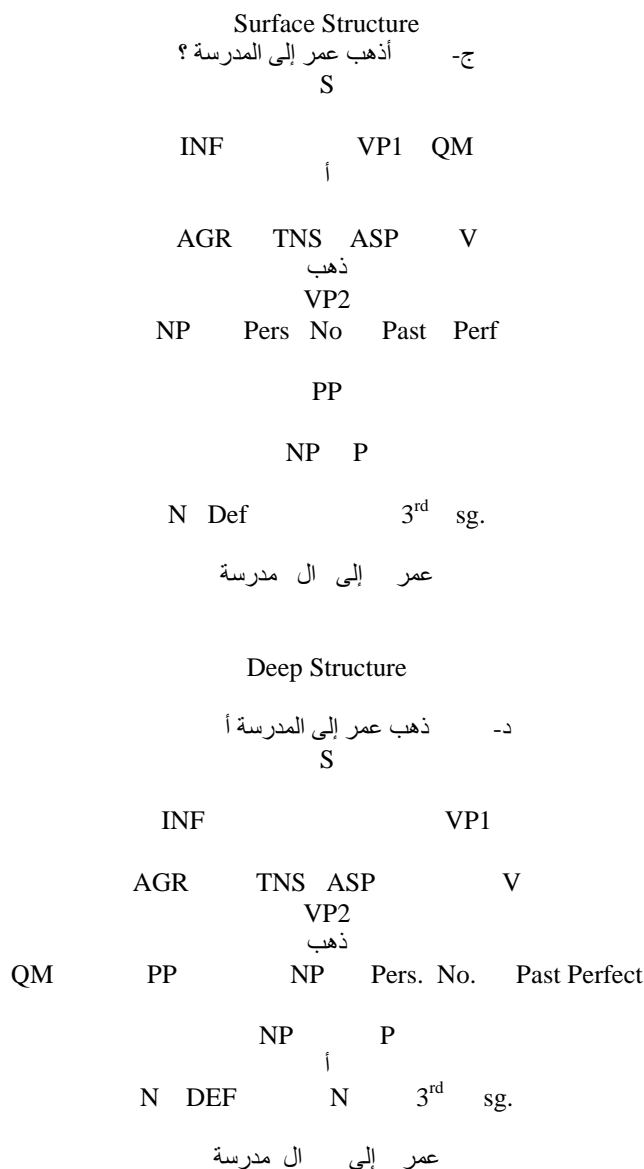
Surface structure: (11.c.) Did 'Umar go to the school?

ذهب عمر إلى المدرسة

Deep structure: (11.d.) 'Umar went to the school

Move Qm to the sentence initial position and replace it with the Qm *hamzah* will arrive at the surface structure. This can be phase-marked as follows:

Surface Structure			
أىذهب زيد ؟			
S			
NP	VP	AUX	QM
N	V	M	QM
زيد	ذهب	ي	أ
Deep Structure			
يذهب زيد أ			
S			
Q	NP	AUX	VP
Q	N	M	V
أ	زيد	ي	ذهب



To derive No.(11.a.) from No. (11.b.), the following operations are needed: Move the Qm at the final sentence in no. b to the sentence initial position and replace it with Qm *hamzah* giving the surface structure in (11.a.). The same thing applies to (c.) and (d.).

## Conclusion

Our approach in this paper has been basically descriptive. We have used the transformational generative grammar as a tool to analyse a type of Arabic question, *hamzah* question. The question particle of *hamzah* question is seen to occur in sentence initially. We have been able to show that, Arabic, as a language with VSO word-order, allows a right hand movement. It is discovered that it is categorized mainly into two, viz: (1) *al-Istifham al-Lughawi* (linguistic question) and (2) *al-Istifham al-Adabi* (literary question). The formal is characterized by *abhathun lughawiyyah* (linguistic analysis) but the latter is characterized by *aghradun balaghiyyah* (rhetorical objectives). The study shows that where two particles of *Istifham Hal* and *Hamzah* are used they both have a syntactic and semantic markers which would be answered by any of *Adawatul-Jawab* (answer tools).

From the foregoing, it becomes evident that the study has given clear meaning to the functions of *Istifham* which elucidate grammatical rules that would be of immense benefits to the following categories of people:

- i. Any student of Arabic who may wish to have a concise but encompassing knowledge about the usage of Interrogative particles.
- ii. English grammarians will also find it useful especially in comparative analysis of the niceties of the



- particles.
- iii. It is very inspiring to a potential Arabic writer who may wish to use interrogative particles in disseminating ideas, thoughts and information as grammarian.

## References

- Adeyemi, B. (2000): *Studies in English Language*, (Ibadan: Encrownfit Publishers).
- Allerton, D.J. (1990): “Language as form and pattern: Grammar and its categories” in *Encyclopedia of Language*, (London: Richard Clay Ltd.).
- As-Samira, I. (1987): *Al-Madarisu Nahwiyyah*, (n.p. : Darul-Fikr).
- Banjo, L.A. (1969): “A Contrastive Study of Aspects of the Syntactic and Lexical Rules of English and Yoruba” (unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Ibadan).
- Chomsky, N. (1965): *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, (Cambridge: MIT Press).
- Crystal, D. (1992): *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*, (New York: Cambridge University Press).
- Dayf, S. (1992): *Al-Madarisu Nahwiyyah*, (Egypt: Darul-Ma‘arif).
- Johnson, S. et al (1996): *Collier’s Encyclopedia*, (New York: ITM).
- Na‘mah, F. (1973): *Mulkhas Qawa’id Lughatil- Arabiyyah*, (Egypt: Matba‘atu Nahdat).
- Olateju, M.O.A. (1998): “A Syntactic Approach to Literary Discourse Analysis: The Yoruba Example” (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Ibadan ).
- Radford, A. (1988): *Transformational Grammar: A First Course*, (Cambridge: University Press).
- Riemsdjik, H. V. & Williams, E. (1980) *Introduction to the Theory of Grammar*, (Cambridge: IMT Press).
- Yusuf, O. (1997): *Transformational Generative Grammar, An Introduction*, (Ijebu-Ode: Shebiotimo Publication).



The IISTE is a pioneer in the Open-Access hosting service and academic event management. The aim of the firm is Accelerating Global Knowledge Sharing.

More information about the firm can be found on the homepage:

<http://www.iiste.org>

## CALL FOR JOURNAL PAPERS

There are more than 30 peer-reviewed academic journals hosted under the hosting platform.

**Prospective authors of journals can find the submission instruction on the following page:** <http://www.iiste.org/journals/> All the journals articles are available online to the readers all over the world without financial, legal, or technical barriers other than those inseparable from gaining access to the internet itself. Paper version of the journals is also available upon request of readers and authors.

## MORE RESOURCES

Book publication information: <http://www.iiste.org/book/>

Recent conferences: <http://www.iiste.org/conference/>

## IISTE Knowledge Sharing Partners

EBSCO, Index Copernicus, Ulrich's Periodicals Directory, JournalTOCS, PKP Open Archives Harvester, Bielefeld Academic Search Engine, Elektronische Zeitschriftenbibliothek EZB, Open J-Gate, OCLC WorldCat, Universe Digital Library, NewJour, Google Scholar

